

## ASEASUK Conference 2014

### Shan Panel Report

**Compiled by Jotika Khur-Yearn (SOAS, University of London)**

During the summer this year, a number of scholars and researchers on Shan studies had participated in the conference of the Association for South-East Asian Studies in UK (ASEASUK). The conference took place at the University of Brighton's Falmer Campus, a short distance away from Brighton city centre.

With more than 140 participants from the UK and other European countries, Southeast Asia, the USA and Australia, the conference provided a wonderful gathering of academic communities to share research and network from across a wide range of academic disciplines in a friendly setting. There were 19 panels across the disciplines, sub-regions and subjects, and among them one is the panel with a special focus on Shan studies. Remarkably this conference has a special contribution to Shan culture, as you can see here the front cover of the ASEASUK Conference Programme book was designed with an image of Shan textile, the beautiful design of Shan women's skirt cloth from Burma/Myanmar, collected in the 1880s, now in the collection at the Royal Pavilion & Museums, Brighton & Hove, number WA508311 (<http://aseasuk.org.uk/3/aseasuk-2014-conference>).



The Shan panel, with a theme “Shan Studies: Manuscripts, Arts, Beliefs and Current Affairs” has covered a few subject areas such as the tradition of manuscripts, British Museum collections of Shan artefacts, social customs and belief, and recent political changes in the Shan State. Six papers were presented at this panel and all the paper presentations have taken place on Saturday from 9am to 1pm in Room A500 of the Checkland Building. The panel was organized by Dr Susan Conway (SOAS Research Associate) and Ven. Aggasena Lengtai (SOAS MA Student) and has received financial support from the Oxford Buddha Vihara and Wat Buddharam London.

The first speaker was Ven. Dr Khammai Dhammasami (Trustee of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies and Abbot of the Oxford Buddha Vihara) whose paper entitled “Saving the Immoral! A Paradox in the Shan Funeral Texts” as he discussed the variety of Shan rhymed Buddhist writings especially composed for making donation or recitation at Shan Buddhist funerals and memorial services. Ven. Dhammasami brought with him some of the funeral texts and showed them to the audience during his talk. The emphasis of his talk was that these funeral texts reconcile between self-responsibility of the Buddhist theory of kamma (S. karma) and saving a ghostly relative through the practice of merit sharing.



The second paper was from Ven. Aggasena Lengtai, an MA student in Southeast Asian Religions at SOAS, University of London. His paper entitled “What Does the Shan Word ‘Death’ Tell Us?” covers the areas of pre-Buddhist and Buddhist beliefs in connection with Shan words for ‘death’. He picked up four particular words as example: ‘Non Phe’ (literary: sleep in silk), ‘Lap Taa Luem Moeng’ (close the eyes, forget the country), ‘Lap Loi Nguen Loi Kham’ (beyond the silver and golden mountains) and ‘Khao Son Mawk Hark Kham’ (enter the golden roots garden).

The third speaker was Dr Alexandra Green (Curator of Southeast Asian Collections at the British Museum) who gave her presentation on “Shan Collections in the British Museum), and we were informed by Dr Alexandra Green that the British Museum holds more than 2,800 objects that are registered as being made or found in Thailand and nearly 4,000 found or made in Burma. Many of these art objects are believed to have Shan origins or connected with Shan regions.



The fourth speaker was Dr Jotika Khur-Yearn (SOAS, University of London), who read his paper on “the World of Shan Manuscripts: Creation, Practices and Preservation” focusing on the centuries-old tradition of producing manuscript books that has resulted in thousands of Shan manuscripts scattered at monasteries and houses in Shan communities and beyond. A project of cataloging and conservation of these collections are being undertaken and some progress was also reported.

The fifth speaker was Dr Susan Conway (SOAS Research Associate) whose presentation entitled “Conserving Cultural Identity in a Shan Context”. But as Dr Conway was not able to be there in person due to the time crash with her lecture in the US, Dr Srilaksana Kunjara Na Ayutthaya read out the paper prepared by Dr Conway. The paper has its focus on the preservation of material culture. Using individual case histories, the author examined current attempts to conserve some surviving material culture in the Shan States.

The six and last speaker of the panel was Mr Khuensai Jaiyen (President and Founder of the Shan Herald Agency for News) and his presentation was on “The Current Changing Political Situation in Shan State” with special focus on the peacemaking process between the government and the armed groups, as part of ongoing political reforms in Myanmar/ Burma. According to Mr Khuensai, in order to achieve the true peace, a change of mindset from both sides is necessary to do that: that peace is not like war. There can be no winners and losers in peace, but only winners. The sooner both sides accept the idea, the sooner peace and harmony will be achieved for all those concerned, both at home and abroad.



Overall, the panel had attracted a number of audiences from other panels of the ASEASUK conference, with a proximate number of 20-25 people listening to the presentations throughout. In sum, it was an eventful and successful panel, which is also a milestone for the world of Shan academic studies.